

UṢŪL AT-TAFSĪR

أصول التفسير

by

Dr. Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

All praise and thanks belong to Allah, the All-High, All-Merciful alone, the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe, Who blessed the mankind with His full message, the Qur'an. Blessings and peace be upon Prophet Muhammad, the last of His messengers, his family, Companions and all those who follow in his footsteps till the end of time.

Qur'an is the last divine message for the humanity. Mankind can attain salvation here and Hereafter, only by applying its teachings in the day-to-day life. Thus it is necessary to know its message in its correct perspective. In order to understand the final message properly scholars have evolved some basic principles and a number of books have been written making the understanding and interpreting of the Qur'an easy.

Dr. Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips, after entering the fold of Islam graduated from the Islamic University, Madinah. He thereafter devoted himself to make the message of Islam popular among the English speaking people and came out with a number of publications to his credit. *Uṣūl at-Tafsīr — Principles of Interpretation of the Qur'an*, is one of his important contribution in the field in English language. May Allah bless his noble efforts with acceptance and all those associated with its publication.

This is the new revised edition of the book revised by the author himself. Hope the readers will find it more beneficial and helpful in understanding the final message of the Almighty.

MUHAMMAD 'ABDUL MUḤSIN AL TUWAIJRI

entitled, *at-Tibyān fī 'Uloom al-Qur'an*.¹⁴ In the mid twentieth century, a number of professors at al-Azhar University wrote concise texts on the subject of *'Uloom al-Qur'an* for their respective colleges. Some of these were later published. Among the more notable is *Minhāj al-Furqān fī 'Uloom al-Qur'an*¹⁵ written for students in the College of *Da'wah wal-Irshād* by Shaykh Muhammad 'Ali Salāmah.¹⁶ *Manāhil al-'Irfān fī 'Uloom al-Qur'an*,¹⁷ a two volume work of over 1000 pages was written by Shaykh Muhammad 'Abdul-'Adhīm az-Zarqāni, former lecturer of *'Uloom al-Qur'an* and *'Uloom al-Ḥadīth* in the College of Islamic Disciplines (*Uṣūl ad-Dīn*). In the latter part of the 20th century, a number of excellent works have been written in the field by university professors like *Mabāḥith fī 'Uloom al-Qur'an* by Ṣubḥi aṣ-Ṣāliḥ, *Mabāḥith fī 'Uloom al-Qur'an* by Mannā' al-Qaṭṭān, *Madkhal ilā al-Qur'an al-Karīm*¹⁸ by Muhammad 'Abdullah Darāz, *al-Madkhal li Dirāsah al-Qur'an*,¹⁹ by Muhammad Abu Shahbah, and *Lamaḥāt fī 'Uloom al-Qur'an*²⁰ by Dr. Muhammad ibn Luṭfi aṣ-Ṣabbāgh.

¹⁴ Published in Egypt by al-Manār Press in 1915 (1334 AH) under the title, *at-Tibyān li ba'd al-Mabāḥith al-Muta'allaqah bil-Qur'an*.

¹⁵ Published under the title, *Jawāhir al-Bayān fī 'Uloom al-Qur'an*.

¹⁶ *Manāhil al-'Irfān fī 'Uloom al-Qur'an*, p. 31.

¹⁷ Published in Egypt by Dār Iḥyā al-Kutub al-'Arabīyah, 3rd ed., 1953.

¹⁸ Published in Beirut by Dār al-Qalam Press, 1971.

¹⁹ Published in Egypt in 1973.

²⁰ Published in Beirut by al-Maktab al-Islami, 3rd ed., 1990.

Section One

TAFSĪR OF THE QUR'AN

The Qur'an, God's final book of revelation to man, represents the primary source of the principles which constitute the way of life known as Islam. The passages of the Qur'an contain advice and guidance in the form of laws, parables, stories, and arguments for those who choose to believe in God and the Day of Judgment. Hence, a believer's success and happiness in this life and the next largely depend on his understanding, internalization, and application of the concepts contained in the Book. However, the depth of comprehension of the Qur'an's meanings will vary from individual to individual due to natural differences in intelligence. This variation existed even among the *Ṣaḥābah* (Companions of the Prophet) (may Allah be pleased with them all), in spite of the Qur'an's clarity of expression and its revelation in seven different dialects. Moreover, Allah, the Most Wise, chose to place generalities in the Qur'an, some of which He later explained in its other verses, while some He (ﷻ) explained only to the Prophet (ﷺ). The Prophet (ﷺ) knew and understood the Qur'an completely because Allah had chosen him as its vehicle and explained it all to him. Hence, Allah, the Almighty, All-Glorious, said in one verse:

﴿إِنَّا عَلَيْنَا جَمْعُهُ وَقُرْآنُهُ فَإِذَا قَرَأْتَهُ فَاتَّبِعْ قُرْآنَهُ﴾ (١٨) ثُمَّ إِنَّا عَلَيْنَا
بَيَانُهُ ﴿١٩﴾
(سورة القيامة: ١٧-١٩)

«Verily, collecting the Qur'an [for you] and reciting it [to you] is My¹ responsibility, so when We read it to you, listen to it. Then it is upon Us to explain it.»

(Qur'an 75: 17-19)

Therefore, it was the Prophet's job to explain the Qur'an to his followers by his actions, as well as his statements. Allah stated this in the Qur'an:

﴿... وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الذِّكْرَ لِتُبَيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ مَا نُزِّلَ إِلَيْهِمْ ...﴾ (٤٤)
(سورة النحل: ٤٤)

«... We have revealed the Reminder [Qur'an] to you [O' Muhammad] so that you may explain to people what has been revealed to them...» (Qur'an 16: 44)

Consequently, the *Ṣaḥābah* all turned to the Prophet (ﷺ) whenever possible during his lifetime for the *tafsīr* (explanation, understanding, interpretation) of the Qur'an. For example, Ibn Mas'ūd (رضي الله عنه) related that when the following verse was revealed:

﴿الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَلَمْ يَلْبِسُوا إِيمَانَهُمْ بِظُلْمٍ أُولَٰئِكَ لَهُمُ الْأَمَنُ وَهُمْ مُّهْتَدُونَ﴾ (٨٢)
(سورة الأنعام: ٨٢)

«Those who believe and do not obscure their faith with

¹ Literally, 'Our'; The 'royal We' is barely used in English, but it is a common feature of Arabic speech, used to indicate the importance of the speaker. It is my standard practice to translate this 'We' as 'I', since the literal translation is a frequent cause of confusion for English speakers.

transgression [*dhulm*], for them there is security, and they are rightly guided,» (Qur'an 6: 82)

— some of the Companions became distressed, because the general linguistic meaning of *dhulm* covers any kind of wrong, major or minor, and none of them were free from error. However, when they approached the Prophet (ﷺ) about it, he replied,

لَيْسَ هُوَ كَمَا تَظُنُّونَ إِنَّمَا هُوَ كَمَا قَالَ لُقْمَانُ لِابْنِهِ -

﴿يَبْنَى لَا تُشْرِكْ بِاللَّهِ إِنَّ الشِّرْكَ لَظُلْمٌ عَظِيمٌ﴾

“It is not as you all think. It is no more than what [Prophet] Luqmān said to his son, «Verily, *shirk* [associating partners with God] is the greatest form of *dhulm*.» (Qur'an 31: 13)”²

Thus the Prophet (ﷺ) clarified for them that the broader meaning of *dhulm* was not intended in the first verse; rather it was used to refer to *shirk*.

In this incident, the Prophet (ﷺ) explained the Qur'an by the Qur'an, demonstrating the first step in the divinely ordained method of understanding and interpretation of the Qur'an that was established for all generations of Muslims until the Day of Resurrection. After the Prophet's death, the *Ṣaḥābah* (Companions of the last Prophet — may Allah be pleased with them all) turned to those among themselves who were more gifted in understanding the Qur'an and who had been able to spend more time with the Prophet (ﷺ) for interpretation and explanation of the Qur'an.

² Muslim, vol. 1, p. 72, hadith no. 226.

﴿لَمْ يَكُنِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ﴾

“Verily, Allah, the Most Great and Glorious, has commanded me to recite to you, ‘*Lam yakunil-ladhina kafaru min ahl al-Kitab.*’ (Qur’an 98: 1). When Ubayy asked if Allah had mentioned him by name, the Prophet told him, ‘yes’, and Ubayy cried.”⁹

Ubayy’s most notable students were Zayd ibn Aslam, Abu al-‘Aliyah, and Muhammad ibn Ka‘b al-Quradhi.¹⁰

In ‘Iraq, Ibn Mas‘ud headed the most prominent school of *tafsir*. ‘Abdullah ibn Mas‘ud, the sixth person to enter Islam,¹¹ was among the top reciters of the Qur’an. The Prophet (ﷺ) himself praised his recitation saying,

مَنْ أَحَبَّ أَنْ يَقْرَأَ الْقُرْآنَ غَضًّا كَمَا أُنْزِلَ فَلْيَقْرَأْهُ
عَلَى قِرَاءَةِ ابْنِ أُمِّ عَبْدِ

“Whoever wishes to recite the Qur’an in the tender manner in which it was revealed should recite it as Ibn Umm ‘Abd (Ibn Mas‘ud) does.”¹²

As for his knowledge of *tafsir*, Ibn Mas‘ud said,

“By the One besides Whom there is no other god, I know where and why every verse of Allah’s book was revealed.”¹³

⁹ Collected by Bukhari, vol. 5, p. 97, hadith no. 154 and Muslim, vol. 4, p. 1313, hadith no. 6031.

¹⁰ *Mabāhith fi ‘Uloom al-Qur’an*, p. 339.

¹¹ *Ṣifāh aṣ-Ṣafwah*, vol. 1, p. 395.

¹² Reported by ‘Umar, Ibn Mas‘ud and other *Ṣaḥābah* and collected by Aḥmad, Ibn Mājah, vol. 1, p. 77, hadith no. 138, al-Ḥākim and others. Authenticated by al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi‘ aṣ-Ṣaghīr*, vol. 2, p. 1034.

¹³ Muslim, vol. 4, p. 1312, hadith no. 6023.

Among the many students of Ibn Mas‘ud who later became scholars in their own right were al-Ḥasan al-Baṣri, ‘Alqamah ibn Qays, Masrūq, al-Aṣwad ibn Yazīd, and ‘Āmir ash-Sha‘bi.¹⁴

Transmission of *Tafsir*

During this period, *tafsir* was taught by narration. That is, the *Ṣaḥābah* who headed schools of *tafsir* would quote the sayings of the Prophet (ﷺ) which explained the meanings of verses, or explain the historical context in which the verses were revealed, or they would quote verses of pre-Islamic poetry which explained the meaning of some words that were no longer in common use. After the era of the *Ṣaḥābah*, their students, the *tābi‘ūn*, continued to teach by narration in much the same way that they had learned. However, some of them also began narrating along with their *tafsirs* tales from Jewish and Christian sources to further explain certain passages of the Qur’an.

It should be noted that some compilation of *tafsir* took place during the era of the *tābi‘ūn*. The most noteworthy example is that of Mujāhid ibn Jabr (642-722 CE/40-103 AH), a student of Ibn ‘Abbās. Mujāhid compiled the earliest known *tafsir*; however, no copy of his work has reached us. The significance of Mujāhid’s *tafsir* can be appreciated from his following statement,

“I read the whole Qur’an to Ibn ‘Abbās three times. During each reading, I stopped at the end of every verse and asked him about whom and why it was revealed.”¹⁵

¹⁴ *Mabāhith fi ‘Uloom al-Qur’an*, p. 339.

¹⁵ Collected by Ibn Nu‘aym in *Ḥilyah al-Awliyā’* and by Ibn ‘Asākir. See *Siyar al-A‘lām an-Nubalā’*, vol. 4, p. 450.

Both these *tafsirs* have their critics. 'Abduh was interested in reforming Muslim societies to meet the challenge of the West, and he called for the abandonment of *taqlid* as the starting point for that reform. He stressed the need for approaching the Qur'an fresh, unencumbered by past interpretations of it. Neither he nor Riḍā would look at anyone else's *tafsir* until they had finished writing their own *tafsirs* of a particular passage.²⁴ In his zeal to accommodate scientific theories, 'Abduh interpreted angels as being synonymous with natural forces, which led him to a symbolic interpretation of the story of Adam and *Iblīs* (Satan).²⁵ His student denied that the Prophet (ﷺ) performed any miracles other than conveying the Qur'an. Both he and his student rejected a number of hadiths reported by Bukhari and Muslim, claiming that they were weak.²⁶ Riḍā was, however, more learned in hadith than 'Abduh and relied on hadiths more than him.²⁷ Both of them gave their intellect great freedom to interpret as they saw fit.

Syed Quṭb lived at a time when the Islamic Caliphate had just been abolished. The Islamic world had been divided into small countries with legal systems that were the product of European colonialism. He felt a deep outrage at Islamic societies' abandonment of the Shari'ah in ruling their affairs. His interpretations of the meaning of *Tawhīd* focused on Allah's sole

=them up in his own words, and published them with his approval in his magazine *al-Manār*. 'Abduh died after having completed from *Sūrah al-Fātiḥah* until verse 126 of *Sūrah an-Nisā'*, then his student continued until his death in 1935 (*Lamahāt fi 'Uloom al-Qur'an*, p. 321.).

²⁴ *Lamahāt fi 'Uloom al-Qur'an*, p. 322, and *at-Tafsir wa al-Mufasssirūn*, vol. 2, Pp. 598-9.

²⁵ *Tafsir al-Manār*, vol. 1, p. 167, quoted in *at-Tafsir wa al-Mufasssirūn*, vol. 2, p. 611.

²⁶ *At-Tafsir wa al-Mufasssirūn*, vol. 2, Pp. 615-617, 628.

²⁷ *Lamahāt fi 'Uloom al-Qur'an*, Pp. 321-322.

right to formulate the laws for the rule of human society. His stress of this point led to the neglect of other aspects of *Tawhīd* and of the dangers posed by forms of *shirk* other than *shirk* in legislation. He seems to have actually been confused about the difference between *Tawhīd al-Ulūhīyah* and *Tawhīd ar-Rubūbiyah*.²⁸ His critics also say that he laid the seeds for today's modern *Takfir* movements with his blanket condemnation of contemporary Islamic societies as having nothing to do with Islam, and with his praise of revolutionary movements in Islamic history.²⁹ Despite these shortcomings, he presented a vigorous Islamic critique of the flaws of secularism and the European civilization that spawned it at a time when most Muslims were apologetic about Islam.

Tafsir and Ta'wīl

The words *tafsir* and *ta'wīl* were considered synonyms by the early generations of Muslims; however, in the centuries following the era of the *tābi'ūn* and their students (9th and 10th centuries CE/3rd and 4th centuries AH), the term *ta'wīl* took on a new meaning with new and dangerous implications. Consequently, it is necessary for us to look at these terms in their original context, as well as their later usage.

The word *tafsir*, which comes from the verb *fassara*, literally means an explanation or an exposition, as in the verse,

﴿وَلَا يَأْتُونَكَ بِمَثَلٍ إِلَّا جِئْنَاكَ بِالْحَقِّ وَأَحْسَنَ تَفْسِيرًا﴾

(سورة الفرقان : ٣٣)

²⁸ See *Fī Dhilāl al-Qur'an*, vol. 4, Pp. 1846 and 1852.

²⁹ See *Aḍwā 'un Islamiyah 'alā 'Aqīdah Syed Quṭb wa Fikrih*, Pp. 43-45, 60-104.

Section Three

TRANSLATION OF THE QUR'AN

The Qur'an, the final discourse between God and man, was revealed in the language of the last and final Prophet (ﷺ); the language of the people among whom he was raised and by whom the last message was destined to be carried to the ends of the world. Allah created man in a variety of colours and taught man diverse languages. Allah, the Most Wise, sent each of His Messengers speaking the language of his people in order to facilitate the transmission of the divine message. This was clearly stated in the verse:

﴿وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا بِلِسَانِ قَوْمِهِ...﴾

(سورة إبراهيم: ٤)

﴿We never sent a messenger with other than his people's language...﴾
(Qur'an 14: 4)

Consequently, all Prophets were raised up from among their own people, even though they all carried the same basic message:

﴿وَلَقَدْ بَعَثْنَا فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ رَّسُولًا أَنْ اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ وَاجْتَنِبُوا
الطَّاغُوتَ...﴾

(سورة التحل: ٣٦)

﴿Verily, We have raised up in every nation a messenger saying: 'Worship Allah and avoid false gods.'...﴾

(Qur'an 16: 36)

Thus, in spite of the final message's universality, echoed in the verse,

﴿قُلْ يَأَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنِّي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ جَمِيعًا...﴾ (١٥٨)

(سورة الأعراف: ١٥٨)

﴿Say: 'O' mankind verily, I am Allah's Messenger sent to all of you,'...﴾

(Qur'an 7: 158)

And the verse,

﴿وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا كَافَّةً لِّلنَّاسِ بَشِيرًا وَنَذِيرًا...﴾ (٢٨)

(سورة سبأ: ٢٨)

﴿We have only sent you as a bringer of glad tidings and a warner for all mankind,...﴾

(Qur'an 34: 28)

— this message was revealed in the Arabic language.

The Islamic state arose in the Arabian peninsula, engulfed it, and quickly spread to the neighbouring lands of Africa, Asia Minor, India, and Asia. Arabic soon became not only the language of the final revelation of Islam, but also the official language of a vast Islamic empire encompassing diverse cultures and languages. Some of the people already spoke Arabic, while most did not. However, within a very short period, Islam and Arabic spread rapidly among the people. Some foreign languages absorbed Arabic-Islamic terms and those who spoke them began to write them in the Arabic script. Eventually, many of these languages were overshadowed or replaced by Arabic. The Coptic language of the Egyptians and Berber of the North Africans are some

examples of the replacement of national languages by Arabic, while Hausa, Persian and Malay are examples of languages which absorbed large amounts of Arabic words and were written in Arabic script. In other areas, trading languages developed, made up of a mixture of local languages and large amounts of Arabic, but even these languages were written in Arabic script. However, when the 'Abbāsīd caliphate weakened, Persian and Turkish warlords carved the state into a number of competing sultanates. Persian was the language of government of many of these states.¹ Eventually leadership of the Muslim state fell into the hands of Mongols and, subsequently the Turks, a form of cultural nationalism arose in which the Turkish language became the official language of the state, and Arabic was de-emphasized, except in religious ceremonies and religious schools.² The famous hadith of the Prophet (ﷺ),

مَنْ قَرَأَ حَرْفًا مِنْ كِتَابِ اللَّهِ فَلَهُ بِهِ حَسَنَةٌ

“Whoever reads a letter from Allah's book earns a blessing,”³

— took on new meaning. This statement was made to Arabic-speaking Muslims to encourage them to read as much of the Qur'an as possible. The goal behind this encouragement was increased exposure to Allah's message, and it was never intended to be the mere parroting of the vehicle in which it was brought. However, with the rise of Turkish cultural nationalism, there arose

¹ See *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 22, Pp. 118-19.

² See *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 3, *The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times*, Pp. 120-1.

³ Collected by Tirmidhi and authenticated by al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ Sunan at-Tirmidhi*, vol. 3, p. 9, hadith no. 2327. (See also *Riyadh-ush-Ṣalīḥin*, vol. 2, p. 512, hadith no. 999, for the English version.)